

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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WASHINGTON, D.C. – On the eve of the thirty-first anniversary of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) strongly condemns the Iranian government's repression of peaceful activists and reformers. In recent weeks, the Iranian government has convicted and executed individuals on the charge of waging war against God (moharebeh). At least ten others have been charged, convicted, and sentenced to death for moharebeh.

“The Iranian government's use of religious crimes to crack down on dissidents who peacefully disagree with the government's interpretation and application of Islamic law is intolerable and should receive the strongest possible rebuke from the world community,” said USCIRF chair Leonard Leo. “Sadly, the Iranian government has been repressing its citizens on the basis of religious identity for years, but in recent months it has been increasingly manipulating the reach of its religious laws to silence, and in some cases put to death, Shia Muslims simply for exercising their internationally protected rights of freedom of expression and freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief.”

The government continues to impose lengthy prison sentences on prominent reformers from the Shia majority community, many of whom have been tried on charges of “insulting Islam,” criticizing the Islamic Republic, and publishing materials that allegedly deviate from Islamic standards. USCIRF has long been on record opposing the application of these kinds of blasphemy and other similar laws.

In recent years, religious minorities, particularly Baha'is, as well as Christians and Sufi Muslims have suffered intensified physical attacks, harassment, detention, arrests, and imprisonment. Heightened anti-Semitism and repeated Holocaust denial threats and activities by senior government officials have increased fear among Iran's Jewish community.

In addition, USCIRF fears that planned opposition demonstrations this week around the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution could serve as a pretext for the Iranian government to go further, using brutal force and charging peaceful protestors with moharebeh and other capital crimes. USCIRF calls on the government of Iran to refrain from the use of force against peaceful demonstrators, and to reign in the security, intelligence, and paramilitary forces as well.

Earlier this week, the United States and the European Union condemned ongoing human rights violations in Iran and called on the Iranian government to fulfill its international human

rights obligations. In late January, the U.S. Senate passed legislation that would impose targeted sanctions on Iran. The Senate bill and a similar bill that passed in the House of Representatives will be consolidated in the weeks ahead and, reportedly, will include language that would also sanction Iran's human rights abusers.

“We are hopeful that the issuance of the joint U.S.-EU statement this week condemning Iran, and the passage of bills in the House and the Senate calling for sanctions for human rights and religious freedom abuses, signal that the U.S. government will hold Iranian officials to account for the flagrant human rights abuses they have committed,” said Mr. Leo. “USCIRF has recommended that the U.S. government, in collaboration with its European allies, should ban from entry and freeze the assets of Iranian officials who have engaged in particularly severe religious freedom violations.”

Each year, since 1999, the State Department has designated Iran a “Country of Particular Concern,” or CPC, due to its systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. As a CPC, Iran can be subjected to economic sanctions under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA). Despite being designated a CPC for 10 years, no IRFA-related sanction has been imposed on Iran, with the U.S. government relying merely on existing sanctions already in place. USCIRF concludes that the rapidly deteriorating conditions for religious freedom justify specific, additional sanctions under IRFA.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF’s principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress.

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